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de Glopper, Cornelis M.; van Kruiningen, Jacqueline F.

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# Context in Writing Process Research

An exploratory analysis of context characteristics  
in writing process research in educational and workplace settings

Kees de Glopper & Jacqueline van Kruiningen

Center for Language and Cognition Groningen, University of Groningen



university of  
 groningen

faculty of arts

(c.m.de.glopper@rug.nl; j.f.van.kruiningen@rug.nl)

## Background

The typical study into cognitive processes in composition does not involve text, nor does it take context into account, whereas sociocultural studies of writing activity tend not to address individual psychological activity. Distinct paradigms for writing research produce literatures that gravitate toward their centers and as a consequence intertextuality is limited to dialogue within research communities. The net result of this is fragmentation of writing theory and writing research. In order to ameliorate this situation, individual-psychological and sociocultural perspectives need to be bridged.

## Research problem and research question

At a theoretical level, current writing process models acknowledge that processes (and subsequently products) of writing depend on context. This has important implications for the study of writing processes, since our understanding of writing results from the study of specific forms of writing that occur under specific circumstances. This calls into question **in what kinds of contexts composition processes have been studied**. There is no review of writing process literature available that provides an answer to this question. This paper, therefore, deals with this issue. It presents an exploratory analysis of the writing process literature.

## Method: sample of publications

Sample of peer reviewed journal publications of writing processes on the basis of an electronic search in two major databases: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Communication & Mass Media Complete (CMMC). This resulted in a sampling frame of more than 2000 potentially relevant studies, published from 1911 up to and including 2012.

So far, a stratified subsample of 70 publications (that report on 74 studies) has been analysed.

The publications address two types of environments for writing: **educational settings** (48 studies) and **workplace settings** (26 studies).

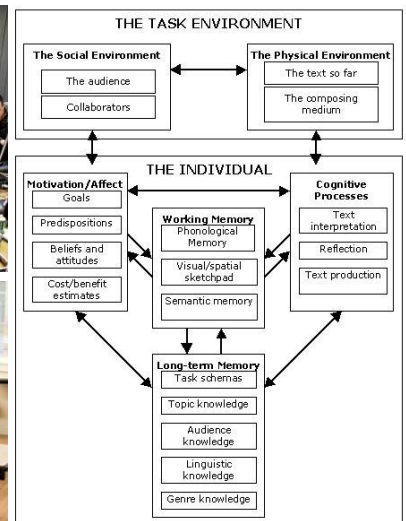
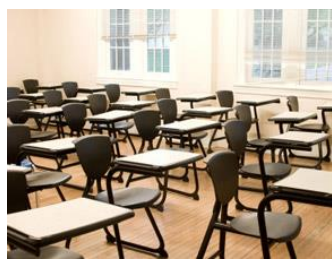
## Method: coding scheme

The coding scheme addressed characteristics of the methodology, the writing task, and the context under study:

- Institutional environment
- Research goal/question
- Research design
- Data collection method
- Writing task
- Preparation for writing
- Collaboration and communication
- Duration, sessions, versions
- Transcription technology
- Context as inspiration and/or concern

## Method: coding reliability

The coding scheme was applied to each of the 70 articles. The analysis of each article was carefully checked by repeating each analysis, in most cases by the reader that did the initial analysis. In the course of this process, some of the coding categories were fine-tuned or redefined. After completion of the coding process we performed an independent analysis by a second reader for a subset of 15 articles. The percentage of discrepant codes or descriptions was less than 5%.



## Results: context characteristics

- 52% of the educational studies are experimental, 81% of the workplace studies are observational.
- Naturalistic writing situations are more common in workplace research (77%) than in educational research (50%).
- Studies in the educational domain often pertain to 'essays', workplace genres are mostly characterized in more concrete terms.
- Audience for writing is specified in almost all workplace research (96%) and in less than half of the educational studies (46%).
- Actual reading or publication of texts is especially rare in educational studies (only 2%), but quite common in workplace research (73%).
- Writing is a stand-alone activity in virtually all educational research (94%), but embedded in a majority of the workplace studies (69%).
- Writers typically have more foreknowledge, are better oriented, gather more information and have more access to relevant sources in workplace studies than in educational studies.
- Writers are without collaborators in 94% of the educational research and in 65% of the workplace research.
- Text feedback is more often present in workplace studies (46%). It is relatively scarce in educational studies (19%).

## Results: context as a concern

In 19% of the educational studies context serves as the point of departure. This occurs in 58% of workplace research.

When studies are more strongly based on experimental designs with more artificial writing conditions, the authors also more often discuss limitations that are related to the impoverished context of the writing tasks studied.

## Conclusion and discussion

The outcomes of the analyses point out that writing contexts vary in systematic ways with study settings, study designs and study approaches. Studies in the educational domain, experimental studies and studies with a solely quantitative orientation often involve impoverished, unnatural conditions for writing. The degree to which context is a theoretical inspiration and/or a methodological concern also co-varies with research settings, designs and approaches. Future research could strive for a richer and more realistic picture of the processes involved in real life writing by addressing the 'white spots' this exploration has identified.